

The INQUIRER

90p

www.inquirer.org.uk

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7785 7 January 2012



PROCESSED

JAN 10 2012

ATU LIBRARY

Banished from Eden

A Unitarian view of sin

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Articles express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

Subscribe Write to Lorna Hill
24 Lodge Lane

Keymer, Hassocks

West Sussex, BN6 8NA

ph: 01273 844940

e: inquirersubs@gmail.com

Annual subscriptions are £32 with discounts for bulk orders. Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £70 plus VAT.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

Editor M Colleen Burns MA

46A Newmarket Road

Cringlford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Sarah Reynolds

Cover From Suntaks old church in Sweden. Photo by Tor Svensson via Wikimedia Commons

Find out more Log on to

www.unitarian.org.uk

or email info@unitarian.org.uk

The General Assembly, Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

Inquiring Words

If you think that peace and happiness are somewhere else and you run after them, you will never arrive.

It is only when you realise that peace and happiness are available here in the present moment that you will be able to relax.

In daily life, there is so much to do and so little time.

You may feel pressured to run all the time.

Just stop. Touch the ground of the present moment deeply and you will touch real peace and joy.

*– From 'Walking Meditation'
by Thich Nhat Hanh*

Be a part of the opening celebration at the 2012 Annual Meetings

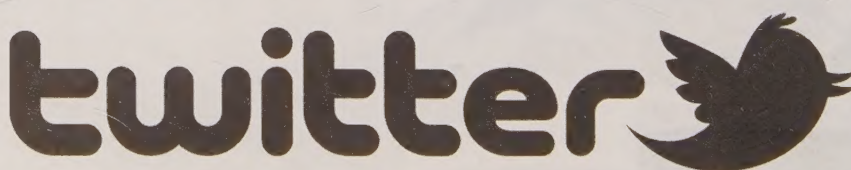
The opening celebration at this year's annual meetings will include a lively and moving tribute to Unitarianism of the present and the future. There will be great music, video, song, and more.

You can be a part of this special celebration in two ways!

1. **Take pictures!** Send digital photos that exemplify Unitarianism at its best. They will be included in a video presentation as part of the opening celebration.
2. **Speak your vision!** There will be short, inspiring, spoken contributions from a range of people. If you would like to be considered as a speaker, please prepare and submit a 300-500 word statement that you would like to present. The subject should be about how Unitarianism has changed your life and/or your exciting vision for the Unitarianism of the future. The best entries will be selected to speak for 3-5 minutes live.

Send your photos and speaking applications via email to revandy@new-unity.org or by post to the Rev Andy Pakula, Unity Hall, 49 Florence Street, London, N1 2DU.

– Andy Pakula



Follow 'The__Inquirer' (two underscores) on Twitter. A little shot of Unitarian news and faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

Evil exists, even when we avoid it

By Sarah Tinker

Sin and evil are not words often heard in Unitarian services; even in the Victorian era when sin was a particularly common topic for preachers to focus upon, Unitarians apparently tended to avoid it – preferring to preach a more hopeful view of human existence. This little, but remarkably helpful, book ‘Unitarian What’s That?’, written by Cliff Reed, Unitarian minister in Ipswich, explains our current position well I think –

Generally speaking though Unitarians share a positive view of human nature and human potential. While not being blind to human weakness and our capacity for evil, we do not see human beings as inherently depraved or corrupt. We have little time for the doctrines of ‘original sin’ and inherited guilt. Rather we see human beings as having inherent and equal worth.

Cliff Reed mentions original sin and no address on this topic of sinfulness could fail to mention this concept. We all know the story – of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, disobeying God’s command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and through their disobedience being banished from the garden, condemned to a life of suffering that would end in death. This powerful myth is, of course, originally from the Hebrew Scriptures and I’ve sometime wondered about the different interpretations of this myth made within Judaism and Christianity. Karen Armstrong points out in her book on Genesis that the later Hebrew Scriptures do not particularly dwell on this original sin and states, ‘the Jewish tradition has laid no particular blame on either Adam or Eve for the human plight. The writer was more concerned to depict the timeless human predicament: Adam is simply ‘everyman’. Eve and the serpent are both aspects of humanity. ... Sin is simply a fact of life, not an unmanageable catastrophe. By plucking the fruit, human beings become conscious of their capacity for good as well as for evil.’ (p29 Karen Armstrong, *In The Beginning* 1996)

So what happened to Christianity? In this regard, St Augustine of Hippo is clearly cast in the role of the bad guy. Suffice to say, in my view Augustine had many fine qualities as a theologian, not least of which are his descriptions of God as love. But in his grappling with the thorny issues that face all of humanity – *Why do we suffer so? Why is life so hard? Why do we die?* – Augustine was very much a product of his age.

He lived from 354-430 CE, and was the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He lived at a time when philosophers generally were pursuing an ascetic path; he was far from alone in thinking that bodily desires were a human weakness. There were many reasons for this, but one clear cause was the early Christian Church’s need to set itself apart from, and morally superior to, the pagan beliefs that were still prevalent at this time. Augustine transformed

thinking on freedom, sin, sex and redemption for all future generations of Christians. And how did Augustine achieve this? He decided after great amounts of study and contemplation that Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden corrupted humanity’s whole nature; that Adam’s guilt and his punishment were passed on to all of his descendants, all of humanity. According to Augustine all human beings are born in a state of sin; sin is then passed on to each generation through the act of sexual intercourse. Humanity is, therefore, inevitably pre-disposed towards sinfulness, towards evil acts. We do not have free will in this. Only the grace of God and the salvation offered through Christ can save us.

Now we may not agree with this but I would suggest that this concept – which eventually became enshrined as the doctrine of original sin by the early church – has had a profound and largely negative effect on western civilisation and therefore on the history of our world.

But if Augustine of Hippo had not lived and had not chosen to explore the meaning of original sin would someone else have come up with the same ideas? Possibly they would. Scholar Elaine Pagels suggests in her book *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* that the reason the early Christians embraced the doctrine with as much enthusiasm as they did was partly psychological – that when we humans try to make sense of the terrible sufferings we may face in life, we would rather feel

(Continued on next page)



We confront the evil that exists and ask ourselves what we would have done in WWII Germany. Wöbbelin Camp survivors liberated by the US Army. US National Archives

We all have potential for evil

(Continued from previous page)

guilty than helpless in the face of these difficulties. The other key reason for this doctrine's acceptance was, Pagels explains, that in making people helpless it helped to assert the authority of the Roman emperors over their subjects. Original sin helps to maintain the political status quo. If we are all inherently bad then we must be told what to do, we must obey – obey the rulers of the church, obey the rulers of the state.

Why would God create evil within?

But not everybody agreed with Augustine. One English monk, Pelagius, (who deserves exploration of his interesting ideas) disagreed with Augustine at a fundamental level. He asked why God would create humanity in his own divine image and yet allow us to be evil at our very core. Pelagius argued that we humans have free will and so have the choice of how to behave. We are not being punished by the existence of death – rather death is part of the natural order. And we are not led into depravity by the sexual act – for sex is again part of the natural order of existence. Pelagius' views held sway for a while in the early church but were eventually deemed to be heretical and original sin, as a concept, was here to stay.

Now there is no doubt in my mind that evil exists. Sin, however we define it, exists. We humans have the capacity to do truly terrible things to one another and to our world and to the whole of creation. If we stop for a moment and think – of evil acts and evil people – we could all quite quickly come up with a lengthy list.

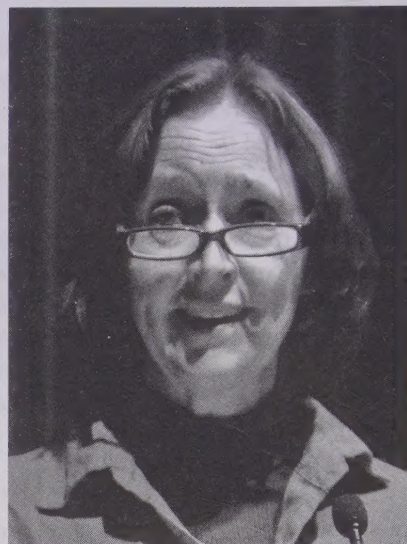
Now I am sure that some of the people committing some of these dreadful acts knew that what they were doing was so terribly wrong – but I think it is worth remembering how often it is that people who commit evil acts genuinely believe that they are doing the right thing. We have a frightening human capacity to justify our behaviour. Simone Weil puts it well when she writes that 'evil, when we are in its power, is not felt as evil but as necessary or even a duty.'

The evident evil of WW II

Remember when you first became aware of what happened in Europe during the Holocaust of World War II? I remember my shock, my disbelief and then slow understanding of some of the Holocaust's horrors. I also remember exploring the issues of the cold-blooded cruelty and the systematic annihilation of fellow human beings in my own mind, hardly daring at times to read just what depths of depravity we humans can sink to. And I remember, at some point, having to ask myself 'what part might I have played in this ghastly time if I had had the misfortune to be alive then; would I have had the courage to stand up against its injustices?' Such self examination for most of us probably brings the answer that we cannot know how we would have behaved, followed by an acknowledgement that in the wrong circumstances at the wrong time many of us would have, at the least, condoned evil acts, or committed them ourselves. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, 'If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?'

The potential for evil, for sinfulness, lies, well and truly, within each and every one of us.

I referred in the first paragraph of the hopefulness of Victorians generally and Unitarians in particular. It was an era in which the phrase 'onwards and upwards for ever' gave a sense of society's optimism, a belief that great advances in health and engineering and education would help to make this a better world for everyone. Such optimism was seriously challenged by the world wars of the



Sarah Tinker

20th century and by the revealing of the damage caused by colonialism. Modern media makes it hard for us to avoid the painful realities of humanity's capacity for wrong-doing, which some may describe as sin.

How to define 'sin'?

But what do we mean by sin? The word itself comes from the Greek archery term meaning to miss the mark, to fall short in some way. We may see sin as separation perhaps – separation from aspects of ourselves, separation from others, separation from that which we hold to be divine. The antidote for sin could then be described as being in right relationship – right relationship with ourselves, with others, with God and with the environment in which we live. Instead of pushing away that which we dislike – we bring it towards us – embrace it, understand it, make it part of us in some way.

If we all have the potential to do wrong then there is a clear need for self reflection and self awareness, to know and understand ourselves better so that we might better avoid the pitfalls of existence that can lead us to harm our world, others and ourselves. To engage in such self examination requires an acknowledgement of our frailty and our brokenness. The German mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart expresses this beautifully when he writes, 'The shell must be cracked apart, if what is in it is to come out. For if you want the kernel, you must break the shell.'

And to help us in honestly facing up to our failings there is great value to be found in rituals of confession and in seeking forgiveness – structures that support us in opening our shells and exploring within. Such explorations may bring interesting insights about the duality, and perhaps the inevitability, of the existence of good and evil. The Hindu sage Ramakrishna, when asked why is there evil in the world replied, 'to thicken the plot.' The existence of evil, the human potential to behave very badly – this gives us something to work on. It is both the backdrop against which our human lives are played and the very script which we write within our hearts. How we shape the plot, given the wonderfully scary gift of free will that we have – well that is the very stuff of life and what a gift that is.

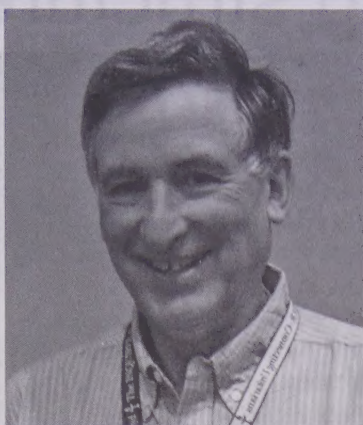
The Rev Sarah Tinker is minister at Kensington Unitarians. Podcasts of Kensington sermons are available at:

<http://bit.ly/cPFtCR>

Faith in action: Reducing youth crime

Tony Cann asks if we Unitarians don't believe in original sin, how can we support permanent exclusion in schools?

There are some secondary schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, where it is difficult to teach the majority of students because of the extreme bad behaviour of a few. In the worst cases this results in assaults on teachers and can result in students being excluded. The excluded students then have nothing to do at home and mix with older peers who spend time on illegal activities. It is a fact that the great majority of young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system are those who at some time were excluded. If we can create a system where we rarely exclude we will reduce the number of young criminals. Youth crime is reducing – perhaps one reason is that exclusions are reducing. I am a member of the Governing Body of a large secondary school in an area which is one of the 5% most deprived in Europe. We have almost eliminated permanent exclusions and days of exclusion, considerably reduced serious incidences of bad behaviour and our attendance is just short of 96% with only 1% unauthorised absence. We have achieved this by taking the trouble to understand the reasons for bad behaviour and by a series of escalating sanctions which include a special classroom for the few who we wish to temporarily withdraw from the mainstream. Just occasionally we get an incident of serious aggressive behaviour and we need to remove a student to another or a special school to support our teachers and demonstrate that this type of behaviour is not tolerated.



Tony Cann

However this is a very rare sanction.

To understand the progress that can be made; four years ago we had five total exclusions and 834 days of exclusion in total. After that year, the Governors made it clear that exclusions were not acceptable and represented our own failure to manage the school effectively. Last year there were no permanent exclusions and just 37 days of exclusion in total. This has also been achieved while reducing all forms of selection, except distance, from the school which has increased those who qualify for free school meals by 50%.

What we find is that in almost every case of really bad behaviour the student is subject to

extraordinary pressures and stresses at home. What they need is in fact not punishment, though sanctions to stress that bad behaviour is not tolerated are important, but sympathy, help and understanding. We have four pastoral managers who keep close contact with 100 students that need this type of support and they make personal contact with every one nearly every day. We also survey our students regularly and take action on the results of the surveys.

We believe every one of our students has the capacity to live a rewarding life and we reject the idea that some people are born as criminals. As Unitarians we do not support the idea of 'original sin'. It is our responsibility to encourage 'the best in everyone' – our motto.

Can I ask that everyone who is associated or has contact with a school tries to persuade the school to avoid permanent exclusions and to use all forms of exclusion sparingly. In this way we will reduce youth crime and the tendency towards irresponsible behaviour such as the recent riots.

Tony Cann is a member of the Penal Affairs Panel of the Unitarian General Assembly.



A reduction in school exclusions could result in less bad behaviour, such as that seen in the riots last summer. Photo of the aftermath of the Liverpool riots by Andy Miah via Wikimedia Commons

New governing structure needs work

By Neville Kenyon

As the 2010-2011 General Assembly president, I was asked by the National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF) if I would keep a log of my activities during the year. This I agreed to do and my 'report' was published in the NUF Viewpoint in August 2011 and is still available at <http://bit.ly/uIakSS> or at www.nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/pdfs/Vp218.pdf.

The reason for my agreeing to report to the NUF was that there was simply no other body to which such a report would have been relevant! The president, in effect, operates in splendid isolation from the formal governance of the General Assembly. A constitution review panel has now been organised to address several issues including that of the status of the president and vice-president within our national Assembly.

Currently, therefore, the president is a totally free agent having no formal connection with the Executive Committee (EC) and no direct line of communication with our headquarters at Essex Hall. He or she is as aware of the developments at the centre as anyone else visiting the national web site or reading the denominational press. To be fair, however, our Chief Officer, Derek McAuly took every opportunity to telephone me with any information which he felt was relevant.

To an outside observer this state of affairs would seem to be bizarre and without precedent in any other organisation whether religious or secular. I hasten to add that the situation suited me down to the ground as it allowed me to do my own thing with total freedom and without interference from the governing body or anyone else.

Hopefully, the constitution review panel will ensure that in the future, the president and vice president are at least recognised with a defined role within our movement.

However I relate this lack of structure to so many other aspects of our denomination which I discovered on my visits to over 80 of our congregations. This is not intended to develop into a direct criticism of the folk who work so hard for our movement at all levels. We are, after all, an avowedly diverse community and one expects a degree of eccentricity. Furthermore, my lasting impression of my presidential year is one of widespread enthusiasm and many expanding congregations.

But I have had cause to wonder whether the radical changes in our national governance structure, now in its sixth year, have been proven to be a better way forward than the previous GA Council, the meetings of which the president chaired giving him or her a pivotal role. Perhaps it is time for us to appraise the 'success' of the eight-member elected Executive Committee structure?

I have had increasing reservations regarding the radical changes we made at the Annual Meetings in 2006. These were the result of many months' consultation by a task force selected to consult widely and finally recommend the ideal structure to govern British Unitarianism in the 21st century. The resolution was passed with acclaim at a special general meeting of the Assembly. There were, naturally, dissenting voices raised at the time but these were drowned by the enthusiasm for a change which would surely solve all our problems at a stroke.

Having been elected as a member of the first EC for its inaugural three year session, I shared the enthusiasm for change and was totally committed to the commission/panel sub-



Neville and Betty Kenyon represented Unitarians at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party in 2010. Photo by James Barry

structure. I was also enthused by the road shows we organised throughout the country, the formal links each of us had with District Association and Commissions and the sterling efforts made to ensure that at least one EC member was present at every significant Unitarian event throughout the country.

In those early days, despite my personal commitment to promoting the EC governance form as ideal, I was conscious that the new structure never achieved what I considered to be its deserved level of popularity. During my congregational and District visits as vice president and president, it became even more apparent that our national leadership system is indeed under intense scrutiny.

I suppose the first warning sign was the lack of candidates putting themselves forward for the second three year session. This was largely accorded to the fact that the work of EC members was seen as very arduous and few of our members were therefore willing to undertake such formidable responsibility.

I now believe that this was not the reason. Had the first three years been seen as truly radical and inspired there would perhaps have been even more than the 23 candidates who put themselves forward for that first election. So there were signs of increasing disillusionment after those first three years. But we told ourselves that was far too early to make a final judgement – let's give it a bit longer to settle and all will be well.

But what has happened since? An increasing number of willing volunteers have been co-opted on to the EC because too few candidates have stood for election. Others have resigned along the way.

(Continued on next page)

Hi-vis Unitarians: Getting the word out

By Angela Maher

After consulting the wider movement, at the 2011 Annual Meetings in Swansea, the Executive Committee (EC) announced that they were restructuring the denominational activities around three priority areas:

- Supporting ministry.
- Developing local leadership.
- Increasing our visibility.

The Visibility Strategy Group has been put together to lead work on the last of these.

The group began its work on 1 October. It is being co-led by Melanie Haberstroh, Meredith Moss, and Angela Maher, all of whom work professionally in media, communications and public relations. The other members of the group are Philip Colfax and Ann Howells, who have particular strengths in congregational work and social action.

What is the Visibility Strategy Group doing?

We have been asked to create a visibility strategy, and to ground this in Unitarians' social justice work.

We think that this strategy will be in two parts.

1. How can we make Unitarianism visible nationally? This is likely to suggest actions for the EC or Essex Hall headquarters. And we will consider whether we need new national action groups for specific elements.
2. How can we make Unitarianism visible locally? This is likely to focus on supporting congregations' work by providing tools and developing skills. We will also consider how individuals might be able to help promote Unitarianism.
3. We are also considering how best to incorporate the ideas that the EC presented in Swansea, as well as other ideas and suggestions we have received. And we

are contacting some people directly where we think they can help us on specific topics.

How can people get involved?

We know that a lot of good work is already being done to make Unitarianism more visible. We hope that congregations and individuals will continue to promote Unitarianism – all over the country, your efforts are already drawing new people in to our wonderful faith, and we want to build on your existing work.

We will be discussing our visibility strategy at the 2012 Annual Meetings in Keele, where we are sponsoring a workshop jointly with the Unitarian Communication Co-ordinators Network (UCCN). We hope that this session will allow people to ask us questions, but also give people a practical opportunity to develop their external publicity skills through UCCN.

Finally, please send us any ideas or suggestions that you have – these could be for improving either national or local visibility. We cannot promise that we will be able to use them all in the first instance, but we will certainly consider them. The co-leaders' individual email addresses are available in the latest GA Directory, or you can contact us via Essex Hall.

Angela Maher is co-leader of the General Assembly's Visibility Strategy Group.



Tough questions from former president

(Continued from previous page)

The commission/panel system which produced sometimes prodigious outcomes has already been scrapped to be replaced by strategy groups, only one of which is currently up and running. It would take many words to even paraphrase the results produced by the Denominational Support, Faith and Public Issues, Communication, Education and Training and Ministry Commissions. In my experience, they were the real engines driving our movement forward. I have often been asked why we abandoned these before the new strategy groups were properly developed.

Other questions involve the dilution of links between EC members and Districts and the abandonment of road shows which offer discussion between the EC and members of the community at different geographical locations. The EC seems to have become increasingly detached from the grass roots. This may be an illusion but it certainly has credence!

Can eight members from a random candidate base truly represent our national body without any regional spread? What happens if every elected member is from one District, all men, all women, all of the same theological flavour? The next three-year EC contingent could legitimately decide that the new strategy groups were not the answer and land us with yet another upheaval in our structure. It's so easy with only eight serving EC members to alter so much for the sake of

expediency or due to a lack of diversity of experience.

Although each of our congregations is independent and most of them passionately autonomous, my experience indicates that the occasional telephone contact by Essex Hall to ask how they are getting on and offer support would be very welcome. Many of our congregations feel that they are being left to their own devices. Fortunately many of our District Associations support individual causes but wouldn't it be great if the GA in the form of the EC showed support for local groups too?

Few of us would wish on our movement another task force to find out whether the model created by the last one was ideal. But unless we can witness true progress in achieving some of its set goals at the Keele GA Meetings in April 2012, the EC will inevitably come under increasing scrutiny.

I suppose it is really a question of priorities: for example, which is more important – positive action by the EC to support struggling congregations or a continuous reassessment of our organisational structure?

I do know which of these two alternatives would be the easier to deal with – but would the EC be tempted to take the line of least resistance? Surely not!

Neville Kenyon is former president of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

You might be better off with the Baptists

Circle services are great. You sit, as you would expect, in a circle. The service is lead by a member of the congregation on a topic announced in advance so that everyone can bring along thoughts and reading and, possibly, prayers. The circle service leader has a vague idea of the structure of the service but the format is usually dictated by the number of readings/amount of discussion. Circle services are cheap and intimate and can bring people closer together, spiritually as well as physically. (Go on, admit it. You have a small congregation and a large church and you spread yourselves about. Why? To make the church look fuller? Because you like sitting on your own? Because this is *your* pew?)

Once the congregation is used to the format then you can become a bit more inventive with activities, meditations, talks followed by discussion. You might even go OUTSIDE.

And then:

You offer to lead a circle service on tolerance, always a favourite with Unitarians. You allow the congregation to contribute for a quarter of an hour or so and then you drop your bombshell. At the GA this year Jane Dwinell, an expert on small congregations, was quoted as saying that in order to grow your congregation you should:

Ensure that everything is of the best possible quality

Consider what it is like for someone coming into your church for the first time

Have a cause beyond yourself

Have a vision of being bigger

Permit no bad behaviour

Ask the congregation to consider what such behaviour could be and then discuss how such behaviour could be dealt with in a way that will not make the offender feel that they are about to be excommunicated. If the church is to deal with bad behaviour it is important that it is clear that it is the *behaviour* not the *beholder* at fault. An open discussion like this should help, if someone has to be asked to change their behaviour, to mitigate feelings of resentment and hurt.

If you don't do this what are you going to do? Are you absolutely sure that there is currently no bad behaviour in your congregation and that there never could be.

At Upper Pocklington they are still using *Hymns of Worship* because the organist didn't like the green book; a visiting preacher who mentioned the purple book was given a basilisk stare and turned to stone, he makes a useful plant stand.

Mrs A and Mr B shake their heads sadly if anyone has the temerity to light a chalice and they withdraw to a corner over coffee so as not to be contaminated. The secretary has announced that there will be a fellowship service with the neighbouring Baptist Chapel over her dead body. The treasurer's annual report is comprehensible only to her so no one really knows how much money there is. The chair holds all the deeds and other important papers at home because he doesn't trust banks. Miss C, over coffee, tells her friend Mrs D very loudly and in the hearing of the visiting preacher all the things that were wrong with the service.

Often, at coffee time, there are three distinct groups all



muttering to each other and gazing bitterly over their shoulders at the other two groups. No one speaks to newcomers as these are supposed to earn their acceptance in the congregation by a period of apprenticeship; well, Mrs E does chat to them if she can steer them into the porch where such un-UP behaviour cannot be seen. If a newcomer manages the requisite seven services of being completely ignored then s/he is told that if they behave themselves they may eventually be offered membership of UPUC which is a pearl of great price as Unitarians are wonderful free-thinking, tolerant people and Unitarianism is the crown of all religions because 'Florence Nightingale was a Unitarian, you know.'

The UPUC has never contributed to any charity or local good cause as 'Charity begins at home'. Their one contribution to life in Upper Pocklington is a flower-festival-cum-white-elephant stall to which no one comes because Mrs F does the flowers (she's always done the flowers) and they look hideous and Mrs G runs the white elephant stall (she's always ...) and won't let anyone handle the goods and Mrs H makes the tea (she...) which is undrinkable because she never lets the kettle boil and Mrs I makes real rock cakes (). All monies raised go into UPUC funds – or possibly not. If Mrs H did the flowers, Mrs G made the rock cakes, Mrs F made the tea and Mrs I ran the white elephant stall then things would probably go a great deal better. But how are you going to persuade *Mesdames* F to I not to do the jobs they have ALWAYS done?

Yes, yes, I know these are mainly small things and not too important but if you can't deal with little problems how do you deal with the treasurer, the chair or the secretary. Or, heaven help us, the organist.

What is the difference between a terrorist and an organist?

You can negotiate with a terrorist.

If you happen to visit Upper Pocklington then go to the Baptist Chapel. The theology will make your hair curl but the hymns will be sung with gusto, all the readings will be done and the prayers lead by members of the congregation (you won't be able to hear one of the readings because Gladys doesn't speak so well without her teeth but she does love to be involved).

At the end of the service several cheerful ladies will capture you and drag you to the urn. You will be given a cup of excellent tea and a delicious homemade cake. You will be interrogated about your family, where you live, what you do and finally sent off with a bag of cake for your spouse, your children and your dog. If you have no spouse, children or dog the welcome might well outweigh the theology.

Dorothy Haughton is a cradle Unitarian, growing up at Brookfield church in Gorton. She is a member of the Foy Society, Unitarian Women's Group and the National Unitarian Fellowship. She leads worship in the Midlands. Her column will appear occasionally in 'The Inquirer' with regular dispatches from the 'Upper Pocklington Unitarian Church'.

What is the difference between a terrorist and an organist?

You can negotiate with a terrorist.

URG searches for more dynamism

The Unitarian Renewal Group heard calls for new governance, more sensuality in worship. **Kate Taylor** finds out what that means.

Improved leadership and 'sexed-up' up worship were among the essentials for growth suggested when the Unitarian Renewal Group met at Bradford Unitarian Centre on 8 October to pursue '2020 Vision'. There were 25 people present and the event was chaired by Peter Sampson, member of the Manchester congregation.

The principal speakers were Bolton minister Stephen Lingwood, Yvonne Aburrow, a frequent worship leader, and retired minister Andrew Hill.

Stephen Lingwood, newly appointed chair of the Ministry Strategic Group, referred to the danger of being stuck in our ways of thinking and saw 'now' as a critical time to effect change. He drew a distinction between the leadership we need – people who bring creativity and who define what the future should look like – and the management that perhaps we have, which is simply the operation of things as they are. Ministers should be trained to be leaders, not just managers.

Bigger commitment from members is vital, Stephen said. People need to understand more fully what it means to be travelling a spiritual journey and to care deeply about having their lives transformed. They need, too, to be a

good deal more generous in giving financially. The Unitarian movement has more than enough money but it remains in members' pockets! Somewhere between 5% and 10% of personal income should be directed to one's chapel.

Growth might come, Stephen urged, from church planting – something for District Associations to consider. And then there is prayer, the essential transforming love that should pervade the spiritual life.

Yvonne Aburrow,



Yvonne Aburrow



Celia Midgley lit the chalice at the start of the Unitarian Renewal Group's meeting. Photos by Kate Taylor

whom some readers will know through her splendid work as editor of *The Unitarian*, wanted worship to be more 'erotic', to appeal to the whole body. Much had been lost, she felt, at the Reformation, with an overreliance on 'the Word' rather than on sensuous experiences. She regarded spirituality and sexuality as intertwined.

Worship should be an 'opening up' to the 'divine beloved' and should involve all five senses. There might be the smell of flowers, or incense, or rich earth, and the taste of savoury food. Touch might be experienced in joining hands, ceremonial kissing or anointing with oil and water. The erotic, she told us, 'can be sensual, passionate, tender, mysterious, alluring, mystical.' Our notion of sacred music is limited, Yvonne felt, in excluding the 'erotic'. She contrasted it with the music of Hinduism where 'the classical raga form goes through stages, firstly of yearning for the Divine Beloved, making contact, and achieving union.'

Andrew Hill reminded us that Unitarianism has always been subject to change. Innovation, he thought, lies with individual congregations rather than with the General Assembly. He worried that lay preachers were too often away from their home congregations rather than giving them support. And he commented on the inspiration that is drawn from the Unitarian Nightingale Conference Centre at Great Hucklow.

An afternoon of group discussions yielded a typically Unitarian range of comments not necessarily prompted by the three talks. We need to be known for something distinctive – that promotes visibility – but what? The movement needs a sparkling leader but the role seems to be lost somewhere between the Executive Committee, the Chief Officer and a President who is excluded from the Executive body. It is time for a fresh look at the General Assembly's governance. Leadership at the local level is about much more than leading worship: there is a need for both inspiration and enthusiasm. Small and impoverished congregations might well benefit from the appointment of district ministers. Congregations can be too inward-looking. Our history is relevant to growth. Might giving 2% of one's income to one's chapel be enough? During worship we need a sense of 'otherness' and a sense of the presence of the divine. But the divine is there in the people amongst us. There is a risk of worship becoming too informal. But was Yvonne really suggesting something akin to charismatic renewal?

Kate Taylor is a member of Westgate Chapel, Wakefield.

Letters to the Editor

CCJ critics should learn more

To the Editor:

In what was a good letter on the interfaith scene, (Letters, *The Inquirer*, 26 Nov.) Miriam Walton made some good points but her final sentence describing the Council of Christians and Jews as a 'Zionist front group' is grossly inaccurate and unfair. Just a few days before Miriam's letter appeared our Oxford branch had a talk from a Muslim speaker whose wife is the Chairperson of our Unitarian congregation; in June many members of CCJ joined the Oxford interfaith walk and ended up eating curry at a local mosque then three weeks ago the local synagogue invited people of all faiths to a Sukkot tea. Several of our Jewish members raise money for Neve Shalom, a village jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel that is engaged in educational work for peace, equality and understanding between the two peoples.

Might I suggest that Miriam contacts her nearest branch of CCJ and attends some of their meetings?

On a lighter note, in our branch of CCJ some of the Christians seem to think I am Jewish and the Jews think I just might be a Christian. I keep on telling them that a Unitarian is a Unitarian!

Peter Hewis

Chairman, Oxford branch of CCJ

CCJ is not concerned

For Palestinians

To the Editor:

Re Miriam Walton's letter, 26 November, 'CCJ is not the only interfaith path'

Miriam Walton is right to warn us that the Council for Christians and Jews is a Zionist front organisation. What better illustrates this than that their 'national lunch time seminar series ... for clergy and regional interested parties on the Israel/Palestine conflict' is delivered in partnership with the Anglo Israel Association. How will this allow a Palestinian view to be represented? Nothing on the CCJ website indicates the slightest disquiet at the past and continuing dispossession of the Palestinians. The concern simply seems to be that the Israel-Palestine conflict is being distorted in such a way as to cause anti-Semitism. In other words,

the Christians involved in CCJ consider that an uncritical acceptance of the Zionist project is a pre-condition for the improvement of Christian-Jewish relations.

Such an attitude is good for neither side. It denies Jews the benefit of friendly criticism, and it involves Christians abandoning their humanitarian values.

Francis Clark-Lowes

Member of Brighton Unitarian Church

CCJ responds

To the Editor:

I was surprised to read the final comment of Miriam Watson (Letters, *The Inquirer*, 26 Nov.) after what was an encouraging letter of her relationship with her Jewish friend which had led them both to "reconnect" with their faith traditions.

Hopefully as Miriam continues in her reconnection with her faith tradition she will no longer feel the need to use such dismissive expressions as "wasting time and energy on Zionist Front Groups such as the Council of Christians and Jews." The CCJ is not a Zionist Front group (whatever that may really mean). What we are is the UK's oldest national interfaith group that seeks to bring reconciliation between Christians and Jews by calling each to a sensitivity to where the other is coming from. But also to acknowledge the pain Christians have particularly inflicted upon Jews throughout history.

Unitarians have been an integral part of our work and we richly value their special contribution"

As for Zionism, the latest edition of the our award-winning magazine, *Common Ground*, unpacked the term *Zion* and *Zionism* and pointed to its religious roots and of longing, hope, connectedness with the Creator and, journey. And moving it away from the invective and polemic of the mass media. I have taken the liberty of sending a copy of this to *The Inquirer* office to be forwarded to Miriam. It comes with our good wishes.

The Rev David Gifford MA

Chief Executive

The Council of Christians and Jews

Remembrance poppy could emulate the Tudors'

To the Editor:

Bob Pounder (*The Inquirer*, 12

November) tells us that he wears a red poppy rather than a white one. Surely he could wear both! It is not incompatible to express a commitment to peace and, at the same time, honour those who gave their lives in the wars resulting from politicians' failure to avoid armed conflict.

Indeed, maybe we should create a red and white poppy to combine the two sentiments more closely. This would follow the example of Henry Tudor who expressed the reconciliation of the Houses of Lancaster and York by combining the red and white roses to form the distinctive emblem of the Tudor rose. No matter that neither flower exists in nature!

Alan Pennington

York Unitarians

Clarification

Because of an editing error, the last paragraph of a letter written by the Rev Peter Godfrey which appeared in the *Inquirer* dated 26 November was unclear. The letter was a response to Julian Smith's letter which appeared in the 15 October *Inquirer*.

Peter Godfrey's last paragraph should have read:

"I hope that Unitarians new and old will stand up for what they believe. Accepting the beliefs outlined in Mr Smith's letter would not just be moving closer to orthodox Christians, it would mean denying our Unitarianism."

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

A Unitarian YouTube sensation

By MC Burns

Last month several British Unitarians shared a video on Facebook titled, 'Two Lesbians Raised A Baby And This Is What They Got'. It's footage of 19-year-old Zach Wahls, standing in the Iowa Statehouse and testifying in the debate over an amendment to that state's constitution which would define marriage as exclusively the right of couples consisting of a man and a woman. (See it here: <http://bit.ly/tjpW1w> or here: www.uuworld.org/life/articles/187747.shtml)

Zach spoke passionately. He mentioned his own accomplishments. He's an Eagle Scout, a top-scoring engineering student and a young businessman. And he talked about how the basis of his success has everything to do with his upbringing by his two mums – Jackie and Terry. He talked about the commitment and the love which makes up his family.

He asked the legislature not to pass the amendment because it would codify discrimination. It is a stirring speech, just over two minutes long, but it answers every argument against equal marriage. (The anti-equal marriage amendment may still become law. The lengthy process to amend the Iowa constitution continues.)

When describing his family, Zach mentioned that they attend church. I suppose I should have guessed it, but I found out later that Zach, his sister and his mums are committed Unitarian Universalists. Zach's mums were married in a Unitarian church and his strong faith is one of the things that sustains him.

This is what he wrote for the UU World website:

"I'm a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and have been incredibly blessed to grow up in this faith.

"Our UU fellowship met Wednesday nights at an indoor pavilion in a park owned by the Marshfield Zoo. By my calculations, nothing gets much more Unitarian Universalist than that. My biological mom Terry had been attending the fellowship since before she was pregnant with me. (She'd met UUs while serving as a volunteer physician in Nepal and was impressed with who and what she'd encountered.) Jackie – her now legally wedded wife – was attending a UU fellowship in nearby Wausau, Wisconsin, when the two met. Their commitment ceremony was held in a UU church.

"I've got a great number of friends who, upon discovering I am a person of faith, react negatively when I mention that I'm a devout Unitarian Universalist. Among my generation, religion as it is most often thought of tends to invoke troubling associations and sometimes carries painful emotional baggage. Once I take the time to explain the seven core Principles of Unitarian Universalism, however, the initial hostility often gives way to interest. I could, perhaps, be appropriately labelled an 'evangelical' UU, though I'm hardly as zealous as my evangelical Christian friends.

Our sense of family comes from the commitment we make to each other to work through the hard times so we can enjoy the good ones.

– Zach Wahls



Zach Wahls speaking in the Iowa legislative chamber.

"My church in Iowa City is a forward-thinking congregation by any standard and has officially been a Welcoming Congregation since the mid '90s. In our religious education program, I learned the importance of thinking outside the box, considering all possibilities and putting others before yourself. Our class visited and studied a number of different religious groups in Iowa City, touring mosques, temples, churches, and even Zen studios. After experiencing the rock 'n' roll gospel at the local Evangelical Christian church, more than a few of us were ready to convert.

"More important than the visits and learning, however, were the principles that guided them. From the get-go, it was clear that we were to approach everything with an open mind and to consider as best we could the benefits and drawbacks of all the religions we studied. It was in my RE program, and through the Seven Principles, that I was endowed with some of my most guiding and persistent values: To bring an open mind to the world, to let my light shine and not attempt to extinguish the light of others, to fight for what I believe to be true while remembering that I am fully capable of being (and often am) wrong, to live freely and love openly.

"It was these values and these lessons, my beliefs and my convictions, that led me to speak before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee on that snowy January night. They stilled my shaking hands and gave tenor to my breaking voice. They shaped my words and my character and where "I go from here. And for that, I am eternally grateful."

Zach's testimony – both at the Iowa Statehouse and on the UUWorld website – is a reminder of what an impact Unitarian Religious Education has on individuals who grow up with good values. It also impacts the world as those individuals go out and speak their truth.

It reminded me how grateful we all should be to the volunteers who run Sunday clubs and schools and the youth leaders who take our children on adventures while teaching them, as Zach said, to approach life with open minds and open hearts. I know the issue Zach addresses is so important, but there is a little bit of me that now thinks of the title of his video as 'Two Unitarians Raised A Baby And This Is What They Got'. And, along with that is the hope that the discrimination against equal marriage will end. Then, that just might be the most relevant title for Zach's powerful speech.

MC Burns is editor of The Inquirer.

UCA launches Sierra Leone health project

By Jim Corrigan

The Unitarian Christian Association (UCA) has launched a three-year project to raise £5,000 to improve health care for mothers and babies in the West African state of Sierra Leone, in partnership with Christian Aid.

This was announced by the UCA Moderator, the Rev Jeff Gould, at the association's Autumn Meeting at Memorial Church (Unitarian) in Cambridge, on 29 October.

The European Union has pledged to provide £3 for every £1 raised in this project, so, with gift aid, the UCA is hoping to reach a total of £20,000, or more.

Jeff reminded the meeting that the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches had been a founder member of Christian Aid in 1946, and he appealed to congregations and societies to join this effort.

The Autumn Meeting was addressed by three Christian Aid representatives – Alain Djate, Mandy Loveder and Sarah Croft – who spoke about its partnership scheme and its work in Africa, in Sierra Leone in particular.

Sierra Leone is one of the least developed countries in the world and is still recovering from a devastating civil war that ended in 2002. Despite efforts by the Sierra Leone government to extend health care, provision remains poor particularly in rural areas.

The UCA will be supporting a maternal health project in Kailahun province in the far east of Sierra Leone, run by two long-standing local partners of Christian Aid. The aim is to improve the quality of health and emergency obstetric care at two hospitals in this eastern province.

The Christian Aid speakers emphasised that the money raised is spent directly on the projects, and all is carefully monitored and properly accounted for. It does not go to governments, they said.

The speakers emphasised that the goals of Christian Aid are inspired by Christian ideals, but that their mantra has always been to help people 'of all faiths and none'. The international



The UCA met at Cambridge. Photo by Bob Pounder.

charity currently has three aid projects in Sierra Leone, where only 10% of people identify as Christian, and 60% as Muslim.

They also pointed out their work involves more than simply channelling donations; they also advocate for the poor and defenceless, they fight for justice and they campaign and lobby to end poverty around the world.

Jeff explained that, through this project, the UCA hoped to educate members of our denomination about the work of Christian Aid. He reminded the audience that the UCA had become involved following an appeal by the General Assembly Chief Officer, Derek McAuley.

The Autumn Meeting was preceded by a shared lunch enjoyed by the 25 people who attended, and a contemplative service led by the Rev Andrew Brown, minister at Memorial Church (Unitarian) Cambridge.

If you would like to help with this project (as an individual, congregation or society), then contact the UCA Treasurer Cathy Fozard at cathy@fozard.com or 01625 533 110. Any cheques should be made payable to: 'Unitarian Christian Association'.

Jim Corrigan is a member of Golders Green Unitarians.

Godalming celebrates with an 'Amnestea'

During the last week of November, Meadrow Unitarian Chapel, Godalming, celebrated Amnesty International's 50th birthday with two special events.

As part of our monthly Community Art Group, we held an 'Amnestea' - serving tea and cake, and selling second-hand books and clothes to raise funds for Amnesty. There was the opportunity to make and send cards to those suffering human rights abuses as part of Amnesty's annual 'Greetings Cards Campaign' and we were pleased to welcome several members of our local Amnesty group.

A short Family Service drew attention to the work of Amnesty in a child-friendly way, during which we enjoyed musical performances by two of our young people – Danny and Lizzie Baumberg. This was followed by a card-making session in which children and adults alike demonstrated their creativity, producing images of hope and freedom, and writing messages of solidarity to individuals



highlighted by Amnesty's campaign. As a reward for all our hard work we were treated to a special Amnesty birthday cake (in the shape of an Amnesty candle, with liquorice to symbolise the barbed wire) baked by Louise Baumberg. (photo left)

In all we raised £210 for Amnesty International and sent over 50 cards. This is the third year we have taken part in Amnesty's Card Campaign and we find it a great way to involve all ages in a creative activity which also does some good.

The cards make a real difference to the recipients - it lets them know they are not forgotten, prisoners may be treated better because the authorities know the world is watching and the publicity may eventually contribute to their release. Amnesty's 'Greetings Card' and 'Write for Rights' campaigns are ongoing and new individual cases will be selected for 2012. Details can be found on their website <http://www.amnesty.org.uk>

– Sheena Gabriel - Lay Charge at Meadrow Chapel